

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

051154Z Aug 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HO CHI MINH CITY 000818

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV VM

SUBJECT: (SBU) AMBASSADOR MEETS DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST NGUYEN DAN QUE

REF: A) Hanoi 1971 B) HCMC 169 and previous C) Hanoi 1861

1. (SBU) Summary: In a private meeting in Ho Chi Minh City, democracy activist Nguyen Dan Que told the Ambassador that there has been a gradual expansion of personal freedoms in Vietnam. The visit of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the United States has strengthened the hand of "liberals" within the Communist Party in the run-up to the 10th Party Congress. Que strongly favors Vietnam's WTO accession; he believes that Vietnam's participation in a rules-based system will hasten the demise of the Communist Party. While the Ambassador made clear that he could not guarantee a favorable result, he promised to intercede with the GVN in support of Que's efforts to visit the United States as well as urge the GVN to permit Que to return after a visit. The Ambassador cautioned that finding a way to calibrate Que's message, acknowledging some of the good as well as the bad, would go a long way towards maximizing the impact of his visit while minimizing the risk of a GVN backlash. In a subsequent meeting with Hanoi Poloff, Ministry of Public Security (MPS) officers said that Que's "actions" in Vietnam are becoming more and more difficult to tolerate. They also said that MPS would be able to support Que's trip to the United States if it is permanent, but the concern that he would use a temporary visit to publicly criticize Vietnam's human rights record makes supporting a temporary visit "sensitive and difficult." End Summary.

2. (SBU) The Ambassador and leading democracy activist Nguyen Dan Que met for an hour at a private room at Ho Chi Minh City's Caravelle Hotel on August 3. (Que had expressed unease at meeting the Ambassador at the Consulate.) Seven months after his amnesty and release from prison (ref B), Que told the Ambassador that he is mentally and physically fit. Arriving by taxi, Que said that he had no problem coming to the meeting, although police routinely monitor his activities and those of his wife and two sons. Police have cut telephone service to his house and blocked the use of his wife's cell phone. Police had cut off at least two phone interviews he was giving to U.S. journalists and academics using cell phones since his amnesty. (Que now has a new cell phone, but he is unsure how long it will be operational.) Police question the infrequent visitors to his home after their visits and seek to intimidate their guests not to return, Que added. On a more positive note, Que said the authorities have never attempted to block the monthly financial assistance from his brother his family has been receiving since his first arrest in 1978.

3. (SBU) The Ambassador noted that he had read Que's March 2005 interview with Voice of America. He had found it hard hitting, perhaps even somewhat aggressive in tone. The Ambassador asked whether the police, while in prison, at the time of his release, or afterwards, tried to persuade or intimidate Que to stop. Que replied that he was not interrogated or pressured by police, even when in their custody, because they "know better than to try." However, police have asked his wife to urge him to stop giving interviews.

Vietnam Slowly is Changing for the Better

4. (SBU) In Que's view, although Vietnam's transition to a market-based economy is well underway, Communist Party domination and mismanagement left the country well behind where it should be at this point in time. However, the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement, Vietnam's effort to accede to the World Trade Organization (WTO), and an internal impetus to reform is fostering irreversible and positive change. This process has been bolstered further by the successful visit of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the United States. The Khai visit has opened new possibilities for enhanced cultural and information exchange, which is particularly significant for Vietnam's youth. It also has bolstered the "liberal/reformist" wing of the Communist Party, at a time when internal tensions are increasing in the run-up to the Party's 10th Party Congress in 2006.

15. (SBU) Que believes that the pace of change and Vietnam's international integration are putting one-party Communist rule under increasing strain. The Communist Party is incapable of keeping up with the requirements of a rules-based environment in which Vietnam increasingly must participate. As it responds to demands for reform -- tackling corruption, for example -- the Party is inexorably weakened and power gradually is shifting to the people. Que pointed to the strengthening of institutions such as the National Assembly and the increasing availability of the Internet as developments that, over time, could limit the monopoly of the Party on power and information.

16. (SBU) Because of these factors, Que said that he strongly supports Vietnam's accession to the WTO as well as greater cultural and educational exchanges between Vietnam and the United States. Greater economic freedom and prosperity will give people the courage to demand other rights.

17. (SBU) However, as the USG works with Vietnam on WTO access, it should emphasize that respect for human rights and democracy are preconditions for Vietnam's full and successful participation in the world economy. In this regard, the United States should find ways to reduce the Communist Party's power and "tip the balance" in favor of democracy in Vietnam. In this regard, Que suggested that the USG consider establishing a website to promote democracy in Vietnam and have President Bush meet with leading dissidents when he visits Vietnam in 2006. The USG also should push the GVN to take concrete steps to reconcile with the overseas Vietnamese community, promote greater autonomy for ethnic minority Vietnamese and end GVN limitations on the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people, including recognition of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Que said.

18. (SBU) Que envisioned a nine-point "road map to democracy" for Vietnam. (Note: these are the same points Que outlined in his April 2005 VOA interview.) This would require the USG and others to press the Party to:

- ease the flow of information into and out of Vietnam;
- expand freedom of speech;
- release all political prisoners;
- end government intervention in religious affairs and "oppression" of ethnic minorities;
- secure a declaration from the Politburo that the National Assembly is the supreme legal body in Vietnam;
- secure a GVN declaration that Vietnam will fully adhere to all international norms on human rights and religious freedom;
- pass a law divorcing the Party from Government at all levels of administration;
- pass a new electoral law; and
- call for free and fair general elections and draft a new constitution.

How Hard and How Fast to Push?

19. (SBU) The Ambassador agreed that Que's roadmap was laudable and said we share his desire and vision for a Vietnam that fully respects human rights and democratic ideals. However, the Communist Party will not "commit suicide," so these kinds of changes would require considerable evolution in how the Party sees its role. Moreover, the changes that Que is describing usually occur because of internal developments in a society, not because of outside pressure. We need to appreciate that this transition is likely to be a lengthy one, particularly in a one-party state, the Ambassador noted. For example, China has changed significantly since 1978, although the Communist Party remains firmly in control. Nonetheless, China is moving in the right direction, and that is what is important. The same process will happen in Vietnam. The Ambassador told Que that recently he participated in a live "webcast" in which human rights and other sensitive issues were discussed openly (ref C). For Vietnam, this is a real step forward.

110. (SBU) The Ambassador also stressed that a key question is how far to push and how to deliver the message of change to the Vietnamese authorities. For example, the Ambassador had publicly called for Que's release, but did not attack the GVN in the process. He has critiqued how Vietnam is handling aspects of its economic reform policy but with enough positives so as not to alienate the GVN. Similarly, the Ambassador said that while he rejected GVN entreaties not to meet with Que (ref A), he would not publicize his meeting, a step that would only antagonize the authorities. Que said he would also refrain from publicizing the meeting.

Que to the United States?

111. (SBU) Que told the Ambassador that he wishes to visit

the United States, both to share his political views with the Vietnamese-American community, politicians and others, and to visit his relatives. He sought USG support with the GVN to obtain a passport, facilitate his travel to the United States, and ensure that the GVN will allow him to return to Vietnam. The Ambassador committed to assisting Que, and noted that, as a respected individual, his message will have an impact both inside and outside Vietnam. However, the USG could not guarantee what the GVN response will be. The Ambassador observed that the tone of Que's message in the United States will have great bearing on a GVN decision on permitting his return. Que said he understood.

Ministry of Public Security (MPS) Reaction

12. (SBU) On August 4, MPS representatives sought an off-the-record meeting with Hanoi Poloff to discuss the Ambassador's meeting with Que. A senior MPS department director met Hanoi Poloff at a local cafe. The officer asked about Que's attitude and the content of the conversation, then asked specifically about Que's travel plans and whether the USG would allow him to immigrate. Hanoi Poloff advised the MPS officer that Que had said he does not intend to immigrate to the United States, but instead wishes to take a three-to six-month trip. The MPS officer responded that the GVN would have "no problem" permitting Que to depart permanently for the United States, but permitting a short-term visit "would be sensitive and difficult." The problem, the officer stated, is that the GVN fears that "anti-Vietnam forces" in the United States will use Que as a "mouthpiece against Vietnam" in the United States, which will "deeply offend the Vietnamese people." This would make it difficult for Que to return to Vietnam. Hanoi Poloff confirmed the MPS officer's assumption that there is no legal way the USG could compel Que to avoid public speaking appearances in the United States.

13. (SBU) Hanoi Poloff asked about the current status of dissident novelist Duong Thu Huong, who was granted a temporary visa to visit Italy and France and who was then featured in a highly critical article on the front page of the New York Times. The MPS officer said that she has not returned to Vietnam, and that the handling of her return has become "another sensitive and difficult question."

14. (SBU) The MPS officer explained that MPS and the GVN are very much aware of the danger of creating "symbols" out of imprisoned activists and the damage that legal action against them does to Vietnam's international reputation. However, these dissidents are breaking Vietnamese laws, and as long as those laws exist, it is MPS' job to enforce them. "We try to deal with these sensitive issues in an appropriate manner," the official said. "But it becomes difficult. Que's actions, for example, are coming closer and closer to being unacceptable."

15. (SBU) After the meeting with the Ambassador, Que told HCMC Poloff that he would begin the application process for a Vietnamese passport "the following week." He added that he is not aware of any administrative detention or other legal ruling against him that would prevent him applying for a passport or traveling. After the meeting, ConGen confirmed that Que returned home without incident.

16. (SBU) Comment: In previous meetings with Que after his release from prison, Que categorically refused to consider resettlement in the United States for himself and family, telling HCMC Poloff that "his place is in Vietnam."

17. (SBU) Comment, continued: In the meeting with the Ambassador, Que demonstrated the same tenacity and conviction that helped him survive years in prison and house arrest. Also notable was Que's optimism that Vietnam, through a process of international integration, is inexorably headed towards a more democratic future. It is that optimism and eagerness for change that also poses the biggest risk for Que. In past public statements, he has dispensed with nuance and taken a very tough line against the GVN. It remains to be seen whether Que can and will act on the Ambassador's advice to carefully calibrate his message. As we support Que's plans to visit the United States, we will continue to stress the importance of finding a way to maximize the impact of a U.S. visit while minimizing the risk that the GVN will subsequently deny him reentry. The GVN seems to have decided that having Que as a dissident cause celebre in Vietnam is worse than adding him to the corps of anti-Vietnam activists in the United States. The temporary visit scenario, however, presents the possibility that Que will return to Vietnam after saying or doing something in the United States that blatantly violates one of Vietnam's laws on "threatening national unity" or "abusing democratic freedoms" or some other authoritarian catchall, thus "forcing" the authorities to throw him back in jail. The GVN clearly wants to avoid this outcome. End

Comment.

CHERN